DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 254 CS 509 835

AUTHOR Dillon, Randy K.
TITLE Intercultural Communication Activities in the Classroom: Turning Stumbling Blocks into Building Blocks.
PUB DATE 1998-04-05
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 2-5, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; *Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; *Communication Problems; Cultural Awareness; Educational Games; Higher Education; Instructional Improvement; *Intercultural Communication; *Multicultural Education; Nonverbal Communication; *Simulation; Student Development
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Strategies

ABSTRACT

This paper explores behavior patterns that inhibit effective communication in everyday, educational, and business cross-cultural settings. Opportunities to change these inhibiting patterns, metaphorically referred to as "stumbling blocks," into building blocks or tools for successful intercultural understandings are discussed in the paper through three structured intercultural simulation activities. The paper names six of these stumbling blocks as the assumption of similarities, language differences, non-verbal misinterpretations, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendencies to evaluate, and high anxiety. The paper suggests three activities: (1) the diversity board activity which encourages and challenges students to explore roles of others that they will encounter in a multicultural society; (2) the intercultural dart game, similar to the game "Trivial Pursuit," which concentrates on knowledge of intercultural information; and (3) "BARNGA" which is a card tournament where students play quick games of suits without engaging in any verbal communication. (Contains five references; a sample "diversity board" is appended.) (Author/CR)

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ED 419 254

Running head: INTERCULTURAL SIMULATIONS

Intercultural Communication Activities in the Classroom: Turning Stumbling Blocks into Building Blocks

Randy K. Dillon

Southwest Missouri State University

Presentation at the Annual Convention of the Central States Communication Association

Chicago, Illinois

April 5, 1998

Dr. Randy K. Dillon is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Mass Media, Southwest Missouri State University, 901 S. National Avenue, Springfield, Missouri 65804. Phone: 417-836-4986; Fax: 417-836-4774; Internet: rad986f@wpgate.smsu.edu

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Abstract

This paper explores behavior patterns that inhibit effective communication in everyday, educational, and business cross-cultural settings. Opportunities to change these inhibiting patterns, metaphorically referred to as stumbling blocks, into building blocks or tools for successful intercultural understanding are discussed through three structured intercultural simulation activities.

Changing Stumbling Blocks into Building Blocks: An Exploration of Intercultural Communication Through Structured Activity

In the courses of intercultural communication I teach discussion often centers on the numerous challenges of communicating with someone who is not from one s culture. Although all communication encounters, even with those from the same background, or family can consist of misunderstanding and confusion, these possibilities are heightened when communicating with someone of a different race, ethnicity, or national heritage. The purpose of this paper is to explore how stumbling blocks inhibit effective communication in everyday, educational, and business cross-cultural settings. Specifically, three selected intercultural activities, Diversity Board, Intercultural Dart Game, and BARNGA, are discussed. These activities can change patterns of thinking, and provide opportunities to turn stumbling blocks into building blocks of intercultural communication and understanding.

Stumbling Blocks and Building Blocks of Intercultural Communication

LaRay Barna refers to difficulties of intercultural communication as "stumbling blocks" of intercultural communication (1994). The main stumbling blocks are (a) assumption of similarities, (b) language differences, (c) nonverbal misinterpretations, (d) preconceptions and stereotypes, (e) tendency to evaluate, and (f) high anxiety.

The first stumbling block, assumption of similarities, is particularly menacing because it is often not readily recognized. In an effort to consider everyone as equals with similar needs and requirements of food shelter, and security, as well as a humanitarian philosophy that everyone is more similar than different, differences between people are not considered. Another reason for assumption of similarities is that it reduces discomfort when dealing with someone who may look strange or act strange (Barna, 1994). For U.S. Americans, shared material goods and external adornments such as clothes, hairstyles, music and movie interests, etc. (especially from the West) can lull people into thinking that everyone is the same. U.S. Americans may feel disappointed or baffled to find out that just because the Chinese individual is wearing a "Auston City Limits" tee-shirt, does not share the same worldview.

Language differences are another stumbling block in intercultural communication. Students usually mention this first because so much attention is paid to learning language vocabulary. However, in order to become proficient in another language one does not only learn vocabulary, but also tries to understand different slang, dialects, syntax and the indirect use of language. For example, in Japanese, the word "chigau" translates as "difficult." As a resident and English teacher in Japan I had to learn that often "chigau" in response to my requests did not mean the English "difficult," but was a polite way of saying no. Other language obstacles occur when

individuals only know of one vocabulary meaning for a word or cling to one meaning of a word. Another problem is where one uses a form of a word that is meaning appropriate, but not appropriate depending on the context, or the role one plays in relation to the other in the communication interaction. Still another intercultural language problem is understanding when to talk and when to keep silent.

Nonverbal misinterpretations are a third stumbling block. As Barna (1994) notes:

> People from different cultures inhabit different sensory realities. They see hear, feel, and smell only that which has some meaning or importance for them. They abstract whatever fits into their personal world of recognition and then interpret it through the frame of reference of their own culture. (p.341)

Many students have already experienced or witnessed nonverbal misinterpretations from gestures that have different meanings, or no meaning at all. Other nonverbal misinterpretations that at not so obvious are signs of respect and formality and the different connotations attached to gestures, gaze, clothing, and the expression of emotions.

A fourth stumbling block in intercultural communication is preconceptions and stereotypes. Stereotyping or categorizing is a natural human tendency. Humans stereotype in order to make

sense of the world and to reduce uncertainty so one can know what to act, do or in sum, communicate. The key is not to become slaves to stereotypes. Stereotypes are often jumped to conclusions, that are often faulty. Stereotypes interfere with objective viewing and objective thinking which can lead to ineffective communication (Barna, 1994). Stereotypes, whether perceived as negative or positive are often based on rumors, myths, and fears, and are often fueled by the mass media.

Closely linked with preconceptions and stereotypes is the tendency to evaluate. As an intercultural communication stumbling block the tendency to evaluate is defined as approving or disapproving the statements or actions of another person or group rather than trying to understand the world view of the other (Barna, 1994). The beliefs, values, and norms of the other person may seem silly, strange, or stupid. Often this is the case when one quickly evaluates the other without learning all that is needed in order to make an informed judgment. In addition, ethnocentrism, or the belief that everything in one's own culture or subculture is the best, with everything else ranked below in relation to one's culture is a stumbling block in intercultural communication and in communication between persons from the same culture or nation state.

The sixth stumbling block of intercultural communication is high anxiety. It takes a lot of effort and time to communicate with someone who is from another culture. Stress often results leading people to react in a variety of ways including anxiety,

rejection, hostility, or giving up on trying to communicate with someone from a different culture at all. High anxiety is often a result of individuals not being exposed to intercultural communication encounters. Intercultural communication takes practice, patience, and even mistakes. Just like many skills once individuals has the opportunity to engage in intercultural communication interactions several times, they usually learn how to manage their anxiety levels.

Stumbling blocks cause misunderstandings and can lead to problems in intercultural communication interactions. However, several competencies can help counteract the problems experienced when communicating with someone from another culture. Kohls (1996) suggests the following skills or competencies, which this paper refers to as building blocks of intercultural communication.

These building blocks are:

1. tolerance for ambiguity
2. low goal/task orientation
3. open-mindedness
4. nonjudgmentalness
5. empathy
6. communicativeness
7. flexibility; adaptability
8. curiosity
9. sense of humor
10. warmth of human relationships
11. motivation
12. self-reliance
13. strong sense of self
14. tolerance for differences
15. perceptiveness
16. ability to fail

One of the best ways that students can see how stumbling blocks can be turned into building blocks of intercultural

communication competence is to engage in structured simulation activities that help them practice the skills mentioned above.

Activities/Simulations

This section consists of three activities that I use in my Intercultural Communication courses: Diversity Board, Intercultural Dart Game, and BARNGA. Each activity is explained as well as how each helps students learn more about intercultural communication.

Diversity Board

The Diversity Board Activity challenges and encourages students to seriously think about what diversity means and how diversity influences behaviors and communication between people. Appendix 1 contains a copy of the Diversity Board Activity assignment handed out to the class.

I designed the Diversity Board Activity as a writing assignment for my undergraduate and graduate courses in Interpersonal Communication and Intercultural Communication. I have also used a modified version of the Diversity Board Activity for my individual course section of Introduction to University Life, a course requirement of all first year students at SMSU. A friend has also used a modified version of the Diversity Board Activity in her English and Literature courses at an area high school.

Diversity has become a buzz word over the last few years. Companies, government agencies, educational institutions, and private organizations to name a few examples have talked about the need to recognize what can be gained through the recognition of our planet's vast diversity. However, valuing diversity requires long-term ongoing commitment on the part of citizens. There are no "quick fixes," "magic wands," or easy solutions. Success is proportional to the investment of time and energy given to such an effort (Sue, 1994).

The Diversity Board activity encourages and challenges students to explore roles of others that they will encounter in a multicultural society. This activity encourages an atmosphere where students can feel safe to observe and/or carry dialogues with individuals who are different from them. By opening up and attempting to understand the perspectives of others in their multicultural world, the students' own perspectives will be enriched and changed. The Diversity Board can help students with most of the building blocks or competencies already mentioned, specifically, openmindedness, empathy, curiosity, motivation, and tolerance of differences.

Objectives of the Diversity Board

(1) To understand the multicultural diverse backgrounds of people.

(2) To overcome negative expectations when communicating with strangers that are culturally dissimilar in some way.

(3) To decrease the uncertainty and the anxiety that often accompanies communication interactions between culturally dissimilar individuals.

(4) To talk about multicultural diverse experiences by using a first person voice.

(5) To realize the negative effects of prejudice and stereotyping.

(6) To learn that understanding about others in an increasingly diverse world requires effective communication.

(7) To become aware that competence in intercultural communication requires a combination of knowledge, skills, and motivation.

Instructions

Before students begin writing for this assignment they will need to consult the Diversity Board (see Appendix). Although the size of the Diversity Board can vary depending upon need and space restrictions, the dimensions of the Diversity Board used by the author totals approximately 5 foot in width from left to right, and a little over 4 and 1/2 foot in length from top to bottom. Each square in the Diversity consists of a standard 8 and 1/2 inches by 11 inches sheet of paper. The Diversity Board consists of 35 boxes resembling a checkerboard each designating a specific role in our diverse society. Some of the roles in the boxes focus on race (e.g., African-American); others focus on other human aspects such as ethnicity (e.g., Jewish), religion

(e.g., Moslem), health status (e.g., HIV status), socioeconomic class (e.g., receiving welfare), and life experience (e.g., war veteran). With the aid of the instructor and/or fellow classmates a student is blindfolded and led to the Diversity Board which lies flat on the floor. The blindfolded student is then instructed to gently toss a small lightweight object (e.g. bean bag, pellet, hockey puck) onto the Diversity Board. The student's role for this assignment is dependent upon the box on the Diversity Board that the lightweight object lands. If by chance the small lightweight object does not land on the Diversity Board or if the object lands equally on two squares of the Diversity Board the student will take another turn until he or she has landed on a box on the Diversity Board. The time required for this portion of the Diversity Board activity should be no more than 10 minutes for a small class; 20 to 30 minutes for larger classes.

Assignment

Once all students have thrown for their roles on the Diversity Board they will be asked to answer questions assuming the role that each student has landed on the Diversity Board. Examples of these type of questions in the Diversity Board activity include: What are the stereotypes others form of you? How do you deal with such stereotypes in your communication interactions? What sort of prejudice or bias have you experienced in your personal life and in the workplace? How have you coped with such prejudice? When was a time you gave off a

good impression when communicating with others who were culturally dissimilar to you? In order for the questions to be answered sufficiently allow students time out of class to research their individual role from the Diversity Board. At least two weeks minimum is suggested. I encourage students to be as objective as possible in answering questions. In order to effectively supply answers students should research his or her individual role. This research can include personal interviews, and consultation of books, periodicals, video, and other resources that enrich a student's understanding of their assigned role.

Instructors can limit the number of times that students in the same class can land on a particular role on the Diversity Board. I place a limit of three times for each role for a class size of 25 students. However, I have discovered that when two or more students do land on the same role on the Diversity Board there is often an interesting contrast between students reports depending upon individual student s point of view.

As with any discussion with diversity instructors need to be sensitive to a variety of issues. In the two years that I have used the Diversity Board activity I have had only one student come into my office after class to ask to toss again because of a personal reason for not wanting to research and write about the role they landed on. There may even be a case where the student lands on the role and they identify with that role either publicly (i.e. obese) or privately (undisclosed HIV status). One

way to get around a potentially embarrassing moment by allowing students to throw two or three times and then select one of the roles they land on for fulfilling the Diversity Board assignment.

After students have answered questions assuming the role from the Diversity Board, students are encouraged to answer questions from their own perspective about their experiences in conducting the activity. These questions include: What have you learned about this role that you did not know before? How does this new knowledge affect your perception of an individual who has this role in real life? How does this new knowledge affect your interpersonal communication with an individual who fits this role in real life? What were the difficulties and reservations you had (if any) in assuming this role? Students are also asked to supply suggestions on how to improve the Diversity Board Activity.

Before students turn in their Diversity Board assignments allow discussion time for students to share about their experiences with fellow classmates. This can be done as a class discussion. Instructors should allow at least 20 to 30 minutes for discussion. If there is time an entire class period may be reserved for class discussion. The class discussion enables students to share experiences, discover themes, commensurate about some of the difficulties and challenges of communicating in a diverse society, and realize the rewards and new understanding gained by communicating with others who are different from them.

Although students will undoubtedly communicate about the

differences between themselves and the roles they write about, focus should not be lost on what is similar. Noticing the similarities between people as well as the differences is essential to living in a diverse society. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton (1985) urge individuals to seek out similarities because "with a more explicit understanding of what we have in common and the goals we seek to attain together, the differences between us that remain would be less threatening" (p. 287).

Audience Appeal

The Diversity Board activity encourages students to explore and begin to understand the perspectives of others in a multicultural society. Not only is the Diversity Board a challenging learning activity, it is also a lot of fun. One student wrote that the Diversity Board activity led her to seek information not only about the role that she landed on but to establish connections with material she was studying in other courses. With this in mind the potential for learning and fun through the Diversity Board is exciting.

Intercultural Dart Game

The Intercultural Dart Game was developed by [redacted] in collaboration with two students at [redacted] Matt Andrews and Matt Croak. Both Andrews and Croak designed the board, game rules, and game cards as a final project in COM 360 Intercultural Communication, a course taught by the author in the Department of Communication and Mass Media at [redacted]

The Intercultural Dart Game made its public debut at the Second Annual ARTS RAVE on the [redacted] campus, September 1996. The Intercultural Darts Game has been used and refined by subsequent classes of Intercultural Communication at [redacted] and has been played by students in classes at Greenwood High School, Springfield, Missouri, and East Lynne Elementary School, East Lynne Missouri.

Similar to Trivial Pursuit, the Intercultural Dart Game concentrates on knowledge of intercultural information. Knowledge of both one s culture and other cultures can help alleviate many of the stumbling blocks of intercultural communication. A regular dart board can be painted to reflect the different continents of the world, North America, South America, Africa, Europe, Asia, Australia. The Arctic and Anarctica can be included, but due to the lack of people who live on these continents may or may not be included for questions. If a student throws a dart which hits Africa, for example, then a question about Africa will be asked of the student. If a student lands on one of the ocean areas on the dart board, then depending on rules either the opponent or the player may choose which continent for question. The Intercultural Dart Game can be played by individual players, but I have had the most success splitting up the class into two to four teams where they can compete against each other.

The following section is supplied by Matt Andrews and Matt

Croak which consists of specific instructions for the Intercultural Dart Game.

Game Contents

One dart board, with the world painted on it. One set of forty trivia cards. Two scoreboards. Two wax pencils.

Introduction: This is a game designed to increase a person s knowledge of other cultures, while allowing them to have a fun time learning. It can be played by anyone from age eight on up. A knowledge of intercultural communication is helpful. However, it is not essential. This game will hopefully increase a person s knowledge in a way that is nontraditional. This game can be used to liven up class discussion in intercultural communication.

Game Setup

The center of the board should be mounted at least 68 inches from the ground. The throwing line, or hockey should be at least 93 inches from the face of the board. The player s toes should not be in front of the throwing line when throwing the dart.

Starting the Game

The room should be divided up into two teams. Each team can either designate a thrower or rotate their team members to allow each one a chance to throw. This decision is up to the individual team. Each team should then designate someone to read the cards and someone to keep score. Each team will have a score keeper to ensure neither team is cheating on their scorecard.

The class teacher will be designated as the referee in case of conflicts between the two teams.

Game Purposes

The purpose of this game is to answer a question about category. Once each category has been answered the object is to hit the bullseye (Antarctica) and answer a question supplied by the other side. The abbreviations on the cards are as follows:

AFR.....Africa
ASI.....Asia
AUS.....Australia
EUR.....Europe
NAM.....North America
SAM.....South America
GEN.....General

Game Rules

The rules to this game are simple. Side A throws a dart. Where the dart lands is where the question is read from. Side B then reads the question and Side A must supply the answer. If the dart lands in the blue or on Antarctica, then a general question is read. Side A continues to throw until either 1) they fail to answer a question correctly, or 2) they answer a question from every category. If they fail to answer a question, then it is Side B s turn to go. If, however, they manage to answer a question from every category, then they must attempt to throw the dart in the bullseye (Antarctica). If they throw a bullseye, then Side B would get to them a question from any category. If Side A answers this question correctly, they win. If not, they must continue to shoot for the bullseye. Normally the bullseye is a general question. The only time a team would be able to ask

a question from any category is when the other team has answered questions from all categories.

Keeping Score

Scoring is simple. Every time a team answers a category correctly, the scorers put a check mark in the appropriate category. By both teams keeping score, there should be no question as to the standings of both sides.

Winning

Winning is simple. Merely answer a question from every category, hit the bullseye, and answer one last question from any category supplied by the other side.

Safety

Darts have sharp points. Do not throw darts at any object other than a dart board. Exercise responsibility when throwing the dart.

Hints

This is a game designed for fun combined with education. These rules are by no means set in stone. After playing a few times, you may find the need to modify or completely change the rules. The important thing is to keep the game simple while at the same time increasing people's knowledge of other cultures. Sometimes the knowledge and fun may be lost if the rules of the game are too complicated to understand.

A typical playing card may possess the following topics. An asterisk denotes the correct answer.

Africa
True* or False: The literature of the African people consists largely of folklore.

Asia
Question: How do Japanese people traditionally greet one another?
A. Shake hands
*B. Bow
C. Rub noses

Australia
Question: The first Europeans who settled Australia were
*A. Convicts
B. Miners
C. Farmers
--It was a British penal colony.

Europe
Question: The word livre in French is:
A. door
B. liver
*C. book

North America
Question: What two questions are spoken in Quebec?
Answer: French and English

South America
Question: What country in South America is the world s largest producer of coffee?
A. Venezuela
B. Columbia
*C. Brazil

Ocean General
Question: Chronemics is the study of_____?
*A. Time
B. Space
C. Touch

The questions above can be expanded for class discussion. For example, the subject of convicts first settling Australia can lead to a discussion of immigration policies. The traditional formal greeting of bowing in Japanese culture can spark a discussion of cultural greeting behaviors, and nonverbal communication etiquette. The topic of coffee production in Brazil can be a good starter for a discussion of international cuisine and how people are often first introduced to a new culture through food.

BARNGA

I tried out BARNGA in the Intercultural Communication and Travel: Tips for Trips Abroad course I teach as a week-long Intersession course at [redacted] BARNGA is a card tournament where students play quick games of suits. The person who wins the most games in a round advances to another group where game rules are slightly modified. The key to the game is not to engage in any verbal communication. Students must adjust to each other s rules for playing the card game, much like they will have to adjust to new rules of behavior in another culture. Due to copyright restrictions the full text of BARNGA will not be reproduced in this paper.

BARNGA can be ordered by contacting Intercultural Press, Inc. P.O. Box 700, Yarmouth, ME 04096. Phone: (207)846-5168. Fax: (207)846-5181. The game design for BARNGA was developed by Sivasailam Thiagarajan, and the manual was written by Barbara Steinwachs. According to the game text "Since BARNGA simulates misperceptions and consequent communication difficulties, it is equally at home in learning situations exploring cultural "clashes," and in countless other learning situations focusing more generically on understanding and bridging conflicts. Versatile, simple, and brief, its real-life applications are limited only by our imagination"(Thiagarajan and Steinwachs, p. 28). I was a little hesitant at first to play BARNGA in my classes mainly because the paperback text is cumbersome. Most of

the information needed for BARNGA is provided on the Tournament Guidesheet and the Five Tricks pages.

Building blocks of intercultural communication that BARNGA include the tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, sense of humor, and an ability to fail. One student jokingly exclaimed "I hated it. It was so frustrating. How could a professor pull such a dirty trick on students." The student did later say that he enjoyed BARNGA because he had to deal with his frustration and tolerate the ambiguity of the game, skills that are so important while interacting with others in another culture.

Conclusion

Try out the Diversity Board, the Intercultural Dart Game, and BARNGA! In addition, encourage the development of games, activities, and simulations by students. Set guidelines and boundaries by asking students to include concepts such as diversity, stereotypes, ethnocentrism, race, ethnicity, etc. More importantly, have fun coming up with new exciting ways to learn more about intercultural communication. The lessons learned through innovative simulation games can help students turn stumbling blocks into building blocks of intercultural communication.

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Appendix A

DIVERSITY BOARD

A non-traditional student on campus	A person who has served time for murder	A person over 60 years of age	A man	A person who is a Muslim	A person of Hispanic-Latin Heritage	An adult male under five feet tall
A person who is bisexual	A person who has a learning disorder	A person who is differently abled	A person of Asian heritage	A person with African ancestry	A person who has a speech disorder	A person who is a veteran of the Vietnam War
A person who is a Buddhist	A widow(er) after over 25 years of marriage	A person who is a naturalized citizen of the United States	A person who is gay or lesbian	A person who is receiving welfare	A female over six feet tall	A person of Native American heritage
A person who is an Athiest	A person who is anorexic	A person who is Jewish	A person diagnosed with terminal Cancer	A person who is HIV+	A person who is obese	A high school dropout
A person who is painfully shy	A person who is a grandparent	A person who is left-handed	A person who is blind	A person with red hair	A person who is an international student on your campus	a woman

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